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Called leaders perverts

FBI admits letter attacking Panthers

By Rob Warden

The FBI has admitted it once tried to embarrass the Black Panther Party by sending an anonymous letter to a youth gang leader charging that two Chicago Panther leaders were sex perverts.

Marlin W. Johnson, head of the FBI's Chicago field office when the letter was sent in 1969, testified in federal court here that his superiors in Washington authorized the letter — with precautions to ensure that it couldn't be traced to the FBI.

The longhand letter referred to Panther leaders Robert Brown and Bobby Rush as "sweethearts."

Signed "a black friend," the letter was mailed to Abdul Kenyatta, who was described in FBI documents produced in court as the head of a Panther-affiliated youth gang called Mau Mau, which was at odds with Brown and Rush.

THE LETTER was part of the Chicago FBI office's program set up under a 1967 directive from J. Edgar Hoover to "neutralize black nationalist, hate-type organizations." The directive had advised FBI offices around the country that "no opportunity should be missed to exploit . . . personal conflicts in the leaderships of the groups."

Chicago FBI Agent Joseph C. Stanley, according to Johnson's testimony, wrote a memo to Washington headquarters suggesting the anonymous letter to Kenyatta.

"The writer would indicate an acquaintance of several years with Brown and Rush and would characterize them as opportunists and hustlers," said the Stanley memo dated

Bobby Rush

Dec. 12, 1968. "It will also be alleged that Brown and Rush are sex perverts, the public knowledge of which could prove embarrassing to the image of the BPP (Panthers). The letter would be handwritten, addressed to Kenyatta, and would be in street language, with appropriate use of obscenities."

In another memo to headquarters dated Jan. 16, 1969, Stanley proposed the text, which read in part: "I know those two Brown and Rush that run the Panthers for a long time and those mothers been with every black outfit going where it looked like they was something in it for them. The only black people they care about is themselves. I heard too they be sweethearts and that Brown has worked for the man thats why hes not in Vietnam."

The Washington office replied in a memo dated Jan. 30 that "authority is granted to mail anonymous letter" and asked Stanley to report "any tangible results" from the letter.

A FEW WEEKS before the Kenyatta letter, the FBI sent a letter to Jeff Fort, leader of Chicago's largest street gang, saying the Panthers supposedly had a "hit" out on Fort.

Johnson, who retired from the FBI in 1970 and now heads the Chicago Police Board, testified repeatedly Tuesday that the purpose of the Fort letter was only to disrupt the Panthers by nonviolent means.

"If it had referred to violence of any kind," Johnson said, "it would not have been written by the agent (Stanley), approved by me or approved in Washington."

Johnson is the hostile leadoff witness in a $47.7 million damage suit filed by members of the Chicago Panthers and their heirs, claiming that Johnson and several of his FBI subordinates conspired with various local officials to deprive Panthers of their civil rights.

The conspiracy, according to the Panther theory of the case, resulted in the deaths of Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in a predawn raid on their West Side apartment Dec. 4, 1969.

U.S. District Court Judge Joseph Sam Perry, who is presiding in the case before a six-member civil jury, allowed documents relating to the Kenyatta and Fort letters to be introduced as evidence of the alleged conspiracy.